oranges were used as we would use lemon juice with fish and oysters, and that the peel, apart from being candied, could be a flavoring for wine of various kinds. A young woman in Pieter de Hooch’s A Musical Party in a Courtyard, in the National Gallery in London, stirs the contents of a wineglass with a knife perfumed by essential oils from the zest of an orange she has just peeled. Here is a token of refined leisure rather than a peg on which to hang a sermon.

Pies were a whole load of fun for the sententious moralist. Food enclosed in a solid pastry crust kept much better than if transported raw, or when cooked in other ways. The exquisite contents were protected from corruption by the hard, inedible casing, but once broached, and the filling exposed to the world of decay and sin, the rot would set in. One can go on to compare this with the sober exterior of a Dutch merchant’s house, with his rich possessions concealed within, including his plainly dressed wife, whose voluptuous charms were likewise hidden from the world. But the pie in Item 30, a still life by Roelof Koets, displayed alongside house fruits in a costly porcelain bowl, a goblet of wine perched on a gilt stand incorporating a corpulent Bacchus, and precious silverware, is part of a cheering display of conspicuous consumption, which although full of potential moralistic symbols, proclaims pride and pleasure in the wealth that could afford such a richly stuffed and comestible. It is probable that this pie was in the great medieval tradition still favored by the contemporary English cook Robert May, in whose recipes dried fruit, prunes, dates, pine kernels, suet, chopped-up meat, artichoke hearts, chestnuts, mushrooms, sweetbreads, cockcombs, and sliced lemons snuggle together in a profusion of spices, sugar, egg yolks, and wine.

Early American collectors appreciated the art of the Netherlands, with its apparent emphasis on the virtues of sobriety and hard work. They rebaptized the brothel scenes “Merry Company” and saw the pile-up of luxury goods as a deserved reward for the qualities that had got them where they were. Item 27, an interior by Pieter de Hooch, embodies all the domestic virtues prized in both Old and New Holland: the mistress of the house sits on a low stool before a neat hearth, setting about her tasks like a truly Verstandige Kock (sensible, or better still, competent or even ingenious cook). Far from being a relegation of women to the murky indoors, this image is the celebration of their considerable powers, in a society when, with menfolk at war or on the high seas, women ran businesses and handled money matters with the authority that kept a bourgeois household like this one ticking over with ordered calm. Peter Rose completes the overview with a delicious recipe that the woman in the painting appears to be discussing with a servant, a delicately spiced apple custard made with sweet golden eating apples, wine, eggs, and ginger.

One of the earliest purchases of Dutch paintings was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1871. It included 150 old masters including Still Life with Oysters by Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Item 24). This small painting is an enchanting virtuoso rendering of golden light bouncing off grapes, oysters, and a goblet of wine, perfumed with a swirling twist of citrus peel. Henry James may well have praised Dutch art at this inaugural exhibition for its honest virtues (“We know what it is to have turned with a sort of moral relief, in the galleries of Italy, to some stray specimen of Dutch patience and conscience”), but we can now enjoy the cheerful hedonism behind this particular image (mercifully lacking the usual paraphernalia of moral emblems) as a guilt-free delight in expensive luxury.

This book delights with its well-reproduced paintings, the meticulous descriptive notes of the contents, their possible interpretations, and insights into what foodstuffs people ate and how they cooked them. Art historical and gastronomic studies here complement each other and enhance our appreciation of the artists’ works, an admirable example of how food history can illuminate art history, while taking on board the complexities of interpretation that might otherwise distort our vision.

—Gillian Riley, author, The Dutch Table

Eating Apes
Dale Peterson. With an afterword and photographs by Karl Ammann
ix + 320 pp. Photographs. $24.95 (cloth)

This is a book with an agenda, and an attitude. The authors (with Peterson acting as Ammann’s amanuensis) argue that increasing hunting and consumption of gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos in Africa constitutes a compelling moral crisis, threat to public health, and challenge to biodiversity. Since apes share 96 to 99 percent of our genes, laugh and play, and use tools and language, they note, eating them constitutes virtual cannibalism. They are reservoirs of potentially devastating zoonotically transmittable viruses, like Ebola and HIV, so eating them also puts us all at risk. And their slaughter constitutes a threat to their survival in their last remaining habitats.

While the significance of the genetic similarities between apes and humans is debatable, the argument thus
far is convincing, but Peterson and Ammann are on weaker
grounds when they seek to establish the scale of hunting
and reasons for it. Figures for the killing and consumption
of wild game (labeled “bushmeat”) in rural Africa are
difficult to come by. The authors thus resort to anecdotal
evidence of ape meat being transported and sold in local
markets, but in journalistic fashion, anecdotes soon become
inflated generalizations, and the killing of apes is conflated
with that of all wild animals. In fact, Peterson admits,
Ammann often lacks data and mocks the careful collection
of data by field researchers (pp.192–93, 127–128).

Establishing causes is even more conjectural. The
authors put forward a complex array of causes, involving
population growth, African preference for and high rate of
consumption of game, the opening up of forests and mar-
kets by western logging companies, and the easy availability
of lethally effective shotguns. What they neglect, however,
is the subsistence crisis brought about by endemic civil wars
and economic crises afflicting peoples throughout Central
Africa. It is estimated that up to four million people have
died just in the latest round of Congo civil wars, forcing
people to invade the forest, hunt wild animals, and
scrounge in the mud for diamonds and coltan (a mineral
used in high-tech components) to survive.

Rather, the authors argue that the demand for wild animal
meat comes from African cultural preferences for game and
extravagant consumption of meat (greater than Americans’).
People in the African rain forest have long depended on wild
game, fruits, and tubers for their survival. That such people
like game is to be expected, but studies have consistently
shown that meat constitutes a minority of their overall diet.³
At the same time, people on the savanna rely on bananas,
tubers, and grains, with only small quantities of domestic
meat, fish, or game in sauces, and many have an aversion to
eating game. Hence, the authors’ claim that widespread
African cultural preferences drive game hunting is dubious;
rather, most people only resort to game in times of need.⁴

Related to this is the fact that African subsistence pro-
ducers are closely tied to the commercial market, with
subsistence production subsidizing commerce just as com-
merce augments subsistence strategies. Africans straddle
the two, raising cash and subsistence crops together on fam-
ily plots with family labor or sending some members out
to urban employment, but when cocoa prices or urban
employment collapse, they are forced to find alternative
sources of income and food. Instead of recognizing African
market responses as rational, however, Peterson resurrects
the long outmoded notion of the “dual economy”—the par-
allel existence of mutually exclusive African subsistence and
Western commercialized economies—to argue that the mar-
et only undermines subsistence and corrupts Africans (p.195).

That large-scale development (like logging) has often
been a disaster—socially, economically, and environmen-
tally—is indisputable, leading environmental critics to
advocate “sustainable development” and “appropriate tech-
nologies.” Peterson and Ammann take the opposite tack,
however, arguing that any development is inherently unsus-
tainable and corrupting (pp.141–142, 198), and thus they
relegate Africans to enduring poverty. After all, they con-
clude, ape populations are declining precipitously, while
human ones are increasing out of hand (p.124).

In attributing the problem to African cultural values while
neglecting African needs, Peterson and Ammann follow a
common trope of environmentalist writing about Africa, aptly
summed up as “fortress conservation” by Dan Brockington.⁴
African animals/ecology/forests are endangered by greedy
poachers/wasteful farmers/wanton burning that can only be
remedied by restricting African access to wild resources.⁵ Such
environmental imperialism constitutes a modern “White
Man’s Burden,” in which White environmentalists struggle
to save Africans from themselves by imposing Western values
on them.⁶ But focusing on wild animals/lands/forests at the
expense of humans had little success until environmentalists
began to take account of people’s needs as well. Yet, Peterson
and Ammann condemn such “feel-good” conservationism
and support of “sustainable development,” accusing environ-
mentalists of complicity with loggers and corrupt politicians
in the destruction of the rain forest and its inhabitants.

Rather than seeking to understand the socioeconomic
and political contexts that lead to such developmental and
environmental disasters, then, the authors resort to blaming
Africans (pp.202–204), but theirs is ultimately a moral
argument, not a scientific one, directed against hunting in
general. In admitting that apes constitute only 1 percent of
game consumption, but can be used as a “flagship species”
to attack “the larger problem of unsustainable wild animal
meat consumption in Central Africa” (p.207), they exploit
apes themselves and undermine their entire argument.

—Thomas Spear, University of Wisconsin-Madison

NOTES
1. Readers of Gastronomica may already be familiar with the book. An excerpt
appeared in the spring 2003 issue, and it was published in the California Series
on Food and Culture.
2. There is much confusion concerning the diet of peoples living in the rain
forest. Many differentiate between hunter-gatherers and farmers (here labeled
“Pygmies” and “Bantu” respectively), but recent studies have shown that hunter-
gatherers also raise domestic crops and farmers also hunt. Thus both consume
some game, but rely largely on wild fruits and nuts together with cultivated
bananas and tubers. Tamara Giles-Vernick, personal communication.
An abiding love of chicken did not lead Jane Dixon to write this book. Rather, her research began with curiosity about the "social life of objects," to use Arjun Appadurai’s phrase. Dixon, an Australian, then canvassed twenty-four influential fellow-countrymen to discover what was commonly considered to be the most popular food type. Their replies led her to focus her Ph.D. thesis, from which this book derived, on "the social life of chickens," a mirth-provoking phrase that never failed to startle this reviewer.

The Changing Chicken’s true subject matter—the social life of a commodity, or how culinary cultures and food systems change—means that affection for the taste of fowl is, similarly, not a prerequisite for Dixon’s readers. And yet all of us in the post-Ford (assembly-line) world, dating in the Australian case from the 1970s, are eating more chicken than ever before. Even in the 1960s most Australian homes still had a "chook shed" (hen house) at the bottom of their gardens, but its purpose was to provide the house with eggs. Today chicken accounts for more than a third of the meat consumed in Australia, a country that used to have one of the highest red-meat consumption rates in the world. Drawing on the work of sociologists like Harriet Friedmann as well as her own fieldwork, Dixon explains what caused this dietary shift from eggs to chicken and from red to white meat.

Was the change driven mainly by consumer desire, producer pressure, or retail manipulation? The Australian case reveals that supermarkets—specifically two national retailing networks, Woolworths and Coles—played a crucial role by allying with national processors to make chicken cheap and readily available, and then cannily advertising their wares among both low-wage and more affluent and health-conscious workers. Fifty years after the chicken-meat industry had begun replacing the chook shed, it had risen to become “Australia’s most successful post-war agrifood industry.”

In addition to her useful survey of relevant contemporary social theory, Dixon’s book contains fascinating details about both chickens and Australia. For example, she recounts engrossingly how chickens are produced: their embryos are turned every hour for “exercise”; after hatching, each lives in a space as large as a sheet of A4 paper (8.5 inches by 11.7 inches), the sole exception to their otherwise surprisingly humane treatment; they are fed antibiotics, not hormones, in order to stimulate their growth; they are stunned by electrified water before mechanical knives cut their jugular veins. She prefaced these insights by discussing the way Australians use food to define their somewhat amorphous contemporary identity: Australians like to think of both their food and themselves as casual, fresh, outdoorsy (hence the frequent use of the “barbie” [barbeque]), and eclectic rather than traditional and narrowly defined. Dixon reveals, eschewing ironic comment, the related issue of Australian ambivalence about the influence of America on diets “down under,” despite noting that 35 percent of KFC sales outside the United States are within Australia.

Dixon interviewed people at each stage of the production process, from breeders to cooks. To divine consumer attitudes, she convened focus groups, though their insights—their ignorance of the production process, for example—seem unsurprising. In addition, one cannot help but ask how representative the groups were, as they were made up of nuclear families in which women still do most of the food-work and still defer to the tastes of their husbands and now also their children; they seem, in any case, to contradist her assertion that women’s household labor has been marginalized, rather than simply changed. As so often happens when Ph.D. theses are turned into books, the heavy hand of the academy, in general, and social theory, in particular, sometimes weighs down the prose. Surely it is neither new nor interesting to argue that “capital flows are aided and circumscribed by cultural processes.” Further, to this historian, the occasional use of power points even in a sociology book regretfully forfeits the power of the well-crafted paragraph. On the other hand, Dixon’s descriptions of farms and processing plants, based on her visits and interviews, are particularly vital, providing the book’s most revelatory parts. In those chapters, the “social life of the chicken” turns out to be absorbing and not mirth-inducing at all.

—Diana Wylie, Boston University